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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the notion that comprehension of language involves an active interpretative process entailing both a generating of expectations and a matching of expectations to the "incoming message." There are, however, two forms of discourse in which the relation of text to message differs from that holding in ordinary language. One of these is the language of propositions (or the essayist technique), which has been discussed by Olson; the other is the language of poetry. These two forms differ in their implied relation to speech. Olson stresses the gulf between speech and the language of propositions; poetry, on the other hand, might be regarded as the apotheosis of speech, retaining as part of its formal organization the device of rhythm, along with other ways of creating a patterned disposition of phonetic features that have no visual representation on the printed page. Still, the language of poetry is not that of speech; it requires the kind of attention to text that is not required in speech or in ordinary language. (RA)

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CONTEXT, TEXT, MESSAGE AND FORMS OF DISCOURSE

James Britton

What we do when we listen to someone speaking might be described as looking through the noises he makes in order to discover what he has on his mind. In much of our reading, the process is similar: Michael Polanyi describes how at the breakfast table he may receive letters in several languages, read them through and put them aside having noted their messages. It may then occur to him that his son would be interested to read one of them, but his son knows only English and already Polanyi has forgotten in which language the letter was written. (Polanyi, 1958, p.57) Bilinguality has been used as a research method to demonstrate this dissociation of text from message. Subjects were given a mixed English/French text and asked to read it aloud as rapidly and as accurately as they could; among the errors they made in doing so there was a consistent tendency to translate words bordering on the points where the text changed from one language to the other; i.e., to preserve the message at the expense of the text. (Paul Kolers 1973, p.48) Similarly, Jacqueline Sachs has shown that readers who, within a few seconds of having listened to a paragraph read to them, are offered either excerpts or altered versions of a sentence from the paragraph rarely fail to identify even minimal changes of form that affect meaning, but show little ability to identify changes of form that do not alter the meaning. She concludes that 'the findings are consistent with a theory of comprehension which contends that the meaning of a sentence is derived from the original string of words by an active interpretative process. That original sentence

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which is perceived is rapidly forgotten, and the memory then is for the information contained in the sentence.' (Sachs, 1967)

Pursuing for a moment the notion of 'an active interpretative process' we might note that we take to the listening or reading task a complex set of expectations drawing upon a considerable body of knowledge. We have knowledge of word meanings and the rules of syntax. We have knowledge about the kinds of things that might be said concerning homing-pigeons or horoscopes, horticulture or hamburgers and a vast range of other topics. From this wide field of knowledge relevant areas will be activated as expectations by whatever clues the situation and the utterance offer us. This, in its most general sense, is the linguist's notion of 'context', described by Lyons as 'the knowledge shared by hearer and speaker of all that has gone before. (Lyons, 1963, p.84) Psychologically speaking, it is the frame of reference to which we relate what we see and hear and so construct an interpretation of the meaning intended by the speaker.

I think we may misrepresent this process by failing to give due weight to its two complementary aspects, that of generating expectations and that of matching our expectations with what has been called 'the incoming message'. And I think we may misunderstand the process if we regard context as static, a kind of initial penumbra, so failing to recognize that context builds up constantly as we listen (read, talk), taking into itself all that is relevant from the words spoken and whatever else is happening at the time.

That we are able to pay attention to so much, and in such variety, is to some extent explained by Polanyi's conception of focal and subsidiary awareness. According to Polanyi, we are subsidiarily aware of word meanings and syntax, of the relevant parts of our knowledge of the world, our knowledge of the speaker, our knowledge of the situation: we are subsidiarily aware

of the words we hear. What we are focally aware of is the emerging message, that is to say whatever we interpret to be the speaker's meaning or intention. He illustrates the dual awareness 'dramatically' in a simple example from non-verbal behaviour. Imagine you have dropped some small object - a coin, a stud - and it has rolled under the furniture so that you cannot see it or reach it. You fetch a stick and probe beneath the furniture to recover it. The focus of your attention, Polanyi says, will be upon the far end of the stick; you have only the near end to manipulate so you have to be aware of that, but this is subsidiary awareness, and if it becomes focal you are liable to be clumsy and fail in the task. (Polanyi, 1958, pp.55-6) It is your focus on the far end, remote and unseen, that must direct your movements. Focal awareness, in other words, acts as a 'determining tendency' in the sense in which Lashley used the term; 'the intention to act or the idea to be expressed determines the sequence' of the behaviour - a conjecture which he further explains thus: 'there exist in the nervous organization elaborate systems of interrelated neurons capable of imposing certain types of integration upon a large number of widely spaced effector elements'. (Lashley, 1951 in Saporta, 1961, pp.184 & 192)

Applying his distinction to language, Polanyi writes: 'When I receive information by reading a letter and when I ponder the message of the letter, I am subsidiarily aware not only of its text, but also of all the past occasions by which I have come to understand the words of the text, and the whole range of this subsidiary awareness is presented focally in terms of the message. This message, or meaning, on which attention is now focussed, is not something tangible: it is the conception evoked by the text. The conception in question is the focus of our attention, in terms of which we

attend subsidiarily both to the text and to the objects indicated by the text.' (Polanyi, 1958, p.92) Focal awareness, he points out, is necessarily conscious while subsidiary awareness 'may vary over all degrees of consciousness.' (Id.)

I have suggested that the relation between text and message by which text is transparent upon message holds not only for speech but also for a good deal of our reading. However, the persistence of the written text before our eyes does make possible other kinds of response - witness the fact that most of us have felt apprehensive on behalf of the spy in the story who has to swallow his text once he has committed its message to memory!

Back in 1933, Sapir claimed that 'it is highly important to realize that once the form of a language is established it can discover meanings for its speakers which are not simply traceable to the given quality of experience itself but must be explained to a large extent as the projection of potential meanings into the raw material of experience.' (Sapir, 1961, p.7) Polanyi spells out a similar claim; he suggests first that latent learning in animals relies on their ability to 'reorganize their memories of experience mentally', and then that man's intellect achieves a vast extension of that power 'by the representation of experience in terms of manageable symbols which he can reorganize, either formally or mentally, for the purpose of yielding new information'. (Polanyi, 1958, p.82) I wish to suggest, by way of exegesis of that statement, that when the reorganization of symbols and reading off of the new information take place mentally, they constitute an example of the process of deriving message from text in the way we have already considered: when the reorganization is at the formal level, we are concerned with a different procedure, which we must now go on to consider.

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Olson makes a distinction between 'sentences as descriptions', where the procedure is 'to map sentences on to reality', and 'sentences as propositions', where the procedure is to map sentences on to sentences. (Olson 1972, p.144) Ordinary language, communicating about the world, is of the first kind: the second kind is 'developmentally late in appearing' and 'provides a new basis for language use, a use that may be roughly characterized as a logical use.' (Id. p.156) In the first use, the language is 'completely transparent to the reality that lies behind it; one focuses on the world through the language'; whereas in the second, 'the focus is on the propositions themselves and their relation to other propositions rather than to the reality specified by the sentences; this latter requires a divorce of language from reality.' (Id. p.163) Finally, he claims that whereas the former may restructure the perceptions of a listener, it is only the latter that can restructure the perceptions of a speaker. (Olson 1970, p.272) An essentially similar distinction, but presented in a less dichotomous form, is developed in a later paper, where Olson selects two contrasting modes of discourse among a range of possible modes and labels them 'utterance' and 'text'. Utterance is seen as a product of a contextually dependent system such that meaning is an aspect of a speaker's intention rather than a characteristic of the sentences spoken; it is to be found in the early language of children, oral conversations and utterances, and 'oral memorable sayings' (i.e., songs, narratives, the epics, etc., that carry important cultural information in an oral society.) (Olson 1974, pp.11&13). Text is a product of a contextually independent system in which, as far as possible, meaning lies exclusively in the text. It became possible only when the invention of the phonetic alphabet enabled the written language to be fully explicit, and its development represents a radical cultural change that has 'had the effect of putting a profound bias on western culture as a whole and

on our conception of rational man in particular'. (Id. p.11) As the fullest embodiment of this notion of 'text', he selects the prose writings of the English Essayists, quoting John Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding as exemplary. Such prose was held to be the instrument of certain knowledge, and indeed, knowledge itself came to be taken as 'an extended logical essay - an assertion examined and re-examined to determine all of its implications in a single coherent text'. (Id. pp.22-23) The 'essayist technique', essentially 'the process of formulating statements and deriving their implications and using the results to revise or generalize the original assertion' (p.24) he sees as characteristic of the methods both of empiricist philosophy and of deductive empirical science, and suggests that abstract logical concepts are 'hypothetical constructs invented primarily to permit the formulation of statements from which true inferences can be drawn'. (Id. p.27)

The use Olson makes of this distinction in commenting upon current problems in linguistics and psychology makes fascinating reading but goes far beyond the topic of my paper. I hope I have reported enough to permit me to make one or two points by way of reservation.

It does seem that Olson reserves for the second, later acquired, use of language that process that Sapir described as language discovering new meanings for its speakers; i.e., he implies that ordinary language, as distinguished from propositional language, cannot be heuristic in function. For my part, I think it is to take too limited a view of the procedures by which a speaker's meaning is transferred to a listener to suppose that utterance can ordinarily take place in such a way as to 'restructure the perceptions of a listener' without at the same time restructuring those of the speaker himself. (Every teacher is likely to be familiar with this situation: a student has a problem - I ask him to explain to me what his problem is, and I hear him, as he attempts to restructure my perceptions

to that end, restructuring his own to the point where he no longer has a problem.) I believe there is a very important pedagogical principle involved here: that the incentive of sharing ones ideas and experiences results in utterances which shape those ideas and experiences and so provide a learning experience for the speaker.

Secondly, with regard to 'text', I think it is to take too simple a view of the procedures by which a reader finds meaning in a text to suppose that it does not involve those same processes by which Olson has characterised the understanding of 'utterance': 'To arrive at the meaning, the semantic structure must be supplemented by and interpreted in the light of the listener's knowledge of the world and the context of the utterance'. (Olson 1974, p.6) It seems to me that the difference will rather be one of degree - the degree to which the context is internal or external to the text (and assuming that it will never be exclusively the one or the other). Instead of speaking of 'a divorce of language from reality' in the interpretation of text, I would therefore use Schutz' term and speak of 'bracketing out' our reference to reality; and I believe, for example in deciding which implications of sentences to pursue, the right of appeal to reality will be a constant background to our logical operations.

If what I have proposed here is a shift in the ground rules that will leave 'utterance' and 'text' somewhat less sharply differentiated, it is for the purpose of accepting the validity and relevance of the surviving distinction; a distinction which is now consistent with that suggested by Polanyi when he set a 'mental' over against a 'formal' way of reorganizing symbols for the purpose of yielding new information. However, I shall shortly have a further distinction to propose within the corpus of material Olson included under 'utterance'.

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The fact that my formative years came in the radio age rather than the television age may account for the example with which I open this section. If I have been listening to the radio and someone comes into the room, I may say "I've just heard a fascinating talk'. If he shows interest, I give him to the best of my ability the gist of the talk. I cannot recover the script, the text, but I may nevertheless convey adequately the message, so that in the end my listener is not in much worse position, viv-a-vis the talk, than I am. But if on another occasion I say, 'I've just heard a fascinating poem on the radio' - how can I satisfy the interest I may have aroused? Because I cannot recover the text, I cannot convey the message in any way that could create for him the experience I had in listening to it. Literary critics have for long enough made comments along these lines, making it clear in a variety of ways that the meaning of a poem inheres closely in its words. Coleridge used the term 'esemplastic' to describe the form of a poem: 'seamless', but more than that: 'a unity', but also 'unifying'. Bateson puts the point most explicitly: 'The positive function of the various formal devices of peotry - metre, alliteration, metaphor, verbal repetition, etc., - is to ensure that the poem achieves a unity of impression . . . . The cortinuous verbal links, interconnections and references back (1) prevent the reader from relegating to his memory the beginning of the poem before he has reached its end and (2) are continuous reminders that each sentence in the poem must be read against a background of awareness of the whole poem in all its semantic complexity. Without realizing what is happening we find ourselves forced, in fact, to retain the whole poem in our consciousness all through the process of reading.' (Bateson, 1950, p.55)

The necessity for 'retrospective redefinition' in reading a poem has often been noted. (The word 'sessions' carries no legal flavour when it is

met in the first line of Shakespeare's sonnet 'When to the sessions of sweet silent thought', but it acquires that flavour from lines that follow.) What Bateson claims is a generalisation of that process: Polanyi at his breakfast table has derived the message and forgotten the text of his letters, and is satisfied: substitute a poem for a letter, and that is the beginning of the communicative process, not the end. With the message in mind, the reader has to return to the text and build a network of further meanings, constructing a reinterpretation which takes into account a set of particular relationships between key items in the text and the message. The message becomes, as it were, an important part of the context, part of the knowledge of all that has gone before that is shared by writer and reader. As he reads now, he will be subsidiarily aware both of the message and of the words of the text, while he is focally aware of the fuller meaning that is to emerge, as it emerges. To attempt to exemplify the process at all directly is, I realize, to court disaster. In many of the poems we read it may work at a relatively low level and in a way that is barely discernible: a glance back every now and again, for example, may suffice to enable a reader to keep modifying the emergent meaning in the light of both text and message. To describe it as I have done is perhaps to 'over-dramatize' it: to illustrate it by finding a poem that highlights the process will be to dramatize it even further. Let me nevertheless suggest that a first ordinarily casual reading of the following poem by Emily Dickinson may (1) indicate as its general message that someone who needs looking after - child or invalid - is in a comforting way being put to bed; and (2) create problems with one or two words that do not conform to this notion:

Ample make this bed,

Make this bed with awe;

In it wait till judgement break
Excellent and fair.

Be its mattress straight
Be its pillow round;
Let no sunrise yellow noise
Interrupt this ground.

As experienced readers, readers of this paper are probably already disputing my prognostication: yes, 'awe' could be seen as a problem, even perhaps 'judgement', but once 'judgement' was processed and by the time the reader came to 'ground', there was no longer intact any 'message' about a comfortable bedtime. Yet I am of the opinion that unless a strong sense of such a bedtime is somehow made to contribute one component of the meaning (that is to say, the sense of it is built up and transferred to apply to a burial), then the major thrust of the poem will have been missed.

It is evident that my original description of the 'double reading' process was a rough approximation that needs amending. We might claim, instead, that it is the nature of a poetic text to impose on a reader a closer-than-casual reading, and that a network of message/text interconnections begins to be formed from our first acquaintance with the text. (Indeed, it would be unlikely otherwise that listening to a poem on the radio could have taken a listener to the point where he found it 'fascinating'.)

It is often remarked that the formal devices of poetry have been exploited as an aid to memory and thus facilitated the preservation of the knowledge base of an oral culture. Yet these effects have been very little studied. There is some experimental evidence to suggest that sound cues

may be used to facilitate recall of items from visual memory* and obviously this might throw important light on the nature of the poetry reading process, and in particular on how, in Bateson's words, a reader is able to retain 'a background of awareness of the whole poem'.

In devising function categories for writings produced in the secondary school, my colleagues and I in the University of London Institute of Education Writing Research Unit proposed three principal divisions, transactional, expressive and poetic. (Britton, 1971, Britton et al, 1975) Writings in the poetic category were described as 'verbal objects' or 'constructs' and included both writings in poetic and dramatic form and fictional or autobiographical narratives. In their most developed form such writings are, of course, works of literature. For my purposes here I wish to suggest that the relation between text and message proposed for poetry itself would hold in some degree in the other literary forms (perhaps with variations characteristic of particular genres). I seem to recall that one of the few notions that found any general support in the 1958 seminar on 'style in language' was that the language of literature was a 'non-casual' form of language; in a very general way that has implications for the kind of attention demanded by the literary text and is consistent with the point I am making here.

Olson's principal distinction between the 'transparency' of the text in 'utterance' and its opaqueness in 'the essayist technique' seems to me to be firmly made with respect to some of his categories of 'utterance', but not to others. When he cites as 'ordinary speech' or 'utterance' early children's language, oral conversations and oral utterance, we are in agreement; when he adds to these the oral memorable sayings such as proverbs,

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*From information supplied to me by Roberta Charlesworth who is preparing a thesis on the topic of the reading of poetry.

songs, narratives I want to amend his categorisation. These forms, it seems to me, are highly distinguishable from ordinary speech in that they represent, as it were, an oral society's nearest approximation to the written language. Without benefit of an explicit writing system, these societies had recourse to formal poetic devices as a means of preserving their wisdom. The forms thus produced survived from generation to generation; their survival and their dissemination from area to area would be unlikely to leave them 'completely transparent to the reality that lies behind them.' Rather we must assume that they were in fact objects to be reinterpreted in varying and successive contexts. Olson rightly contrasts the characteristics of these oral memorable sayings with the explicitness of propositional language but does not make a categorical distinction between them and ordinary speech. Having proposed a second category of 'opaque' discourse, that of the poetic text, I see the oral memorable sayings as belonging in that category.

If we are to admit two instances of discourse in which the relation of text to message differs from that holding in 'ordinary language', how do we differentiate between the two? Principally, I think, in their status as writing, or their implied relation to speech. Olson throughout his account stresses the gulf between speech and the language of propositions; for example, 'The language of a literate culture is spoken by no one. It is no longer a 'mother tongue' . . . . Prose is not a natural language, it is a language biased in the service of a particular set of conceptual and cultural purposes.' (Olson 1975, p.367) Poetry on the other hand might be regarded as essentially the apotheosis of speech. While certainly not unaffected by the medium of writing, it retains as a part of its formal organization the device of rhythm along with other ways of creating a patterned disposition of phonetic features.

They have no visual representation on the printed page. Perhaps it is no accident that Wordsworth and Coleridge, in producing Lyrical Ballads, deliberately set out to revitalize poetry by infusing the diction of common speech, and that T.S. Eliot, a century later, deliberately aimed at capturing the rhythms of conversation in his verse for a similar purpose. The vernacular has been hotly defended as a suitable vehicle for fictional narrative from Anglo-Saxon times to the rise of the West Indian novel. But the apotheosis is real enough: poetic form is not speech. One might say that formal organisation of complex kinds is imposed upon the raw material of speech. Winifred Nowottny (1962) has shown that various 'levels' of organisation exist in a poem, each related to each. There is the organisation of sound that constitutes rhythm, and at the same time play upon particular phonetic values may perform its own kind of dance; syntax is a system that interacts in particular with rhythm and verse form; lexical sets and image clusters may set up yet other patterns. Nowottny likens these systems to forces operating on each other, and sees the poem as a stasis that results. The notion of tensions and a stasis is certainly consistent with the model we have described in terms of message and text relationships; from either model it will be clear that response to a poem would call for the kind of attention to text that is not required in speech or in 'ordinary language' as we have been using the term. In fact, it is enough to claim that a word in a poem will have 'a value' on two or more parameters - as for example semantic and phonetic - to indicate that a paraphrastic message would be an inadequate basis for response. Notice finally that in Susanne Langer's terms a piece of logical prose is a message encoded in a notational symbolic system, whereas a poem, or other work of literature, is a 'presentational symbol',

that is to say a single, complex, unique symbol; 'esemplastic' in fact.

(Langer, 1976)

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I know that the form of discourse adopted in this paper is not that of 'the essayist technique'. Nor is it that of literature. Perhaps the point to be made in conclusion is that the existence of these two contrasting modes has extended the range of what may flexibly and appropriately be written in 'ordinary language'.

James Britton
March 7th, 1977

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